12: Douglas T-3 (1951)1953 AJ4 W. Tibetans AJ4

CHAPTER 19

THE CHURCH AS LANDLORD

I believe it was an Englishman, reporting on conditions in Tibet some years back, who said that it was a nation where there were more "crazily rich and crazily poor" than in any other in the world. Fewer than one hundred families and the monasteries own practically all the wealth of Tibet. Somewhat the same condition exists in Ladakh. How much of the land is owned by the monasteries is not readily ascertained. The monastic heads do not discuss those matters; and officials are reluctant to give out the figures. Hence I was not able to get complete figures. But the percentage of the land owned is well over 50 per cent; and it is normally the choice land. The vast majority of the 80,000 people in Ladakh are either attached to the monasteries as lamas or work for the monasteries as farm tenants.

Ladakh ethnologically, culturally, geologically, and geographically is a part of Tibet, though politically it is not. Yet Ladakh has such a close relationship to Tibet that in 1951 I heard prom-

12: Douglas T-3 (1951)1953 AJ4 W. Tibetans AJ4

Yet out of this waste and desolation have been built some of the most magnificent *mani* walls in the world. They stretch almost continuously the whole of the four miles from the Indus to the town of Leh. Some units are a mile long, fifteen feet wide, six or seven high, with *chhortens* at each end. Some are double, with a twenty-five-foot passage in between. Hundreds upon hundreds of slabs of flat rocks have been engraved with prayers and placed on top. All of these prayers are said for the passers-by, who, by the mere act of passing, gain merit. These *mani* walls are the product of centuries of work. Hundreds of faithful hands have carried the rocks from fields and gullies; hundreds of man hours have been spent by lamas working as stonemasons to cut prayers into slate, prayers that will do service so long as the rocks do last.

As we neared Leh we saw the longest of these *mani* walls and kept it on our right until we came close to the south gate of the ancient town. There we stopped and took pictures. I remarked to Rahul that this huge *mani* wall that ran downhill at our feet a mile or so reminded me of a great conduit carrying water off our western mountains for irrigation in distant valleys. He was amused at the symbolism and went on to review the economic plight of this region:

—most of the wealth is owned by a few men and the monasteries.

—the great mass of the people are poor, living at the bare subsistence level.

—the monasteries pay no taxes on their wealth.

Ladakh, therefore, is a deficit area—finance-wise; and since the Kashmir government gets precious little revenue from Ladakh, it is not anxious to spend much money there for improvement.

Ladakh, therefore, remains a feudal system in the modern world, a feudal system held together by the fears and superstitions and adoration created by the religious order of lamas.